THE FOUNDATION OF SELF-ESTEEM

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Self-esteem is a simplistic term for varied and complex mental states pertaining to how one views oneself. It takes but little research in the voluminous literature to see the vagueness and inconsistencies in its various definitions. Even more problematic is the uncertainty concerning its foundational components. The importance of having a solid definition and specific ideas about the foundational components of self-esteem is that both pave the way to recognizing its causes; to predicting effects from those causes; and to organizing the trouble-shooting process for locating those philosophical flaws or psychological scars which lead to low self-esteem.

The purpose of this paper is to offer a *common ground* for thinking about self-esteem at its most basic level. In order to distinguish the "basic level" from the rest of the components of self-esteem, let us liken it to a skyscraper building. Here, the focus is on the building's "underground foundation" and the base upon which that foundation rests. The base is a definition that allows for the assessment of the foundation. The underground foundation itself consists of the mental building blocks called self-meaning, self-identity, self-image, and self-concepts. To help illustrate their interactions, a few of the "masks" and "faces" of self-esteem will be mentioned. What is not being addressed is the "above ground structure"—those theories and manifestations dealt with by most mental health specialists. (*J Natl Med Assoc.* 2003;95:388-393.)

TERMINOLOGY INADEQUACIES

Branden,[1] who somewhat claims to have brought self-esteem to the public's attention in the late 1950s, defines it as the estimate one individual passes on him/herself by way of a value judgment. Ayn Rand[2] said it is reliance on one's power to think. Sigelman[3] refers to self-esteem as *"your overall evaluation of your worth as a person, high or low, based on all the positive and negative self-perceptions that make up your self-concept."* Since these and other literature definitions do not seem to match, let us try to locate a *"common ground"* definition of self-esteem

By returning to the 15th century when *"esteem"* came into the English language, we find that "esteem" was intertwined with everything involved in the evaluation (*"to find the value of"*) of some object, and later somebody. For purposes of selling and buying in the European marketplace, an object required a *"fair"* estimated monetary appraisal in order to approximate that object's exact value. Certain objects necessitated a *"high"* evaluation based upon the fact that they had more worth than value. Back then, an example of a "high" evaluation was a royal heirloom. Its worth was greater than its value because it had been passed down from one generation to the next within that royal family. A more recent example is Hank Aaron's 715th homerun ball, which broke

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the *"unbreakable"* record of Babe Ruth. This *"specialness"* of a relatively inexpensive baseball caused it to sell for millions of dollars.

To make acceptable the *"fair"* and *"high"* appraisals of objects, Renaissance expert evaluators considered three things. First, was what they called *"regard"*—the recognition of the value and/or worth of the object. Second was *"respect"*—a word built around the idea of honor. At that time, honor signified a fixed price for the purpose of ranking the object on the proper rung of the ladder of importance. Third was an *"appreciation"* of the combined value and worth of the object as, for example, the enjoyment of its perfection and beauty. These same three factors were eventually applied to human beings.

To *"regard"* was to recognize that the person had achievements of value and/or worth; to *"respect"* was to rank that person on the ladder of importance, based on the person's recognized achievements; and to *"appreciate"* was to pleasantly *"feel"* the effects of the ranked achievements—pleasantness that could range anywhere from mere approval to profound gratitude or thankfulness. The combination of regard, respect, and appreciation was called *"esteem"* and they became its three fundamental components. When a person assessed him/herself by these three factors—in qualities, in quantities, and in character related behaviors and work products—the result was one's self-esteem.

Subsequently, the adjectives of *"good," "high,"* and *"low"* were added to categorize how one viewed oneself. *"High"* self-esteem came to imply that one *"means a great deal"* to oneself (i.e. having self-confidence); *"low"* self-esteem, the self-consciousness which makes one feels like a *"small"* and inferior person who does not mean much to him/herself. There are currently no universally accepted definitions for "good," "high," or "low"; nor are there specifics about what they describe; nor where one ends and where its opposite begins. Does *"high"* equate to *"good"* and *"realistic"* or to a range of things above *"low"*? Even if we leave off the adjectives, are other terms needed for people who do not assess their qualities, quantities, experiences, behaviors, and work products properly? Since people seldom recognize nor appreciate all of their traits of worth and value, is this what makes up low self-esteem? Everyday conversations tell us that instead of being realistic, most people's assessments of whatever worth and value they do recognize is either positively or negatively distorted or fantasized.

Obviously, self-esteem is not a term adequate to cover all combinations of how people view themselves. Neither is the *"high/low"* vertical line dimension used to describe self-esteem expansive enough to cover all of the numerous exceptional situations. One exception is *"the baddest dudes on the streets"*—those with no fear of dying; with no fear of any man; and with no hesitation to killing someone for *"no reason."*[4] Do they have a *high* or *low* self-esteem? Or is it simply strong, complete, focused, forceful, and destructive?

If their well-developed mindset processes could be kept intact, but flipped over to the constructive side, would this be *"lateral," "horizontal,"* or *"diagonal"* self-esteem? Although presently stuck with the self-esteem" *hand"* dealt us by our medical ancestors, we can still use its three foundational components of regard, respect, and appreciation. However, those three components must be looked at in ways different from how they are viewed in the literature.

DEFINING SELF-ESTEEM

A *"self-esteemless"* robot (a mechanical device powered by computers to do repetitive and boring work) cannot have self-esteem because it has no *"self"* and, therefore, cannot pass value judgments on who it is, what it does, or how it appears. By contrast, when a *"self"* is placed inside a human body and then makes judgments about itself (independently and/or influenced by outsiders), self-esteem will come into being. In its most complete state, self-esteem is the summary judgment of everything a person can assess about him/herself. Those judg-

ments concern: (1) who one is (i.e. one's philosophy of life and character); (2) what one does (i.e. one's tangible and/or intangible work products regarding people, nature, objects, or oneself); (3) what one has (i.e. one's inherent, developed, or acquired qualities and quantities); (4) the different levels in how one appears (i.e. one's physical body, personality, and reputation); and (5) to whom or what one is attached (e.g. God, a concept, a *"special"* person or group, money, possessions, or power). Despite being assessed by different methods, each of these five categories and each of the subcategories, levels, or dimensions contained in these five have *"positives"* and *"negatives"* related to worth and/or value. If all of the *"positives"* outweigh the *"negatives"* and thereby establish a level of self-confidence, one's view of oneself is that of having a *"good"* or *"high"* self-esteem; if the reverse, a *"low"* self-esteem.

THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SELF-ESTEEM

One judges who one is based upon how closely one's actions conform to one's chosen archetype standard. The selection of this archetype is founded on one's belief that it is an ideal guide for maneuvering through the maze of life. By its very nature, one's chosen archetype provides answers to a person's most basic questions—*"Who Am I?" "What is my purpose and position in life?" "How shall I live?" "What do I want to become?" and "What happens to me when I die?"* Afrocentric-oriented people have God as their ultimate archetype and a firm belief of being made in the image of God.[5, 6, 7] Since everybody's *"being"* is made from God's image, everybody is spiritually related. In order to live up to God's standard, everybody ought to have as their purpose in life the striving to be humanistic and empathetic in order to create, enhance, or maintain harmony and unity on Earth.[8, 9]

To have one's *"being-image"* of God connected with God and to have fellowship within the community are the two bonds of greatest inner significance for Afrocentric people. Those two bonds represent one's self-meaning and both provide groundedness, stability, and worth-type security in one's life. Recognition of these three effects of the two bonds allows them to be ranked, honored, appreciated, and therefore, esteemed. This is an example of a worth-based self-esteem. If one chooses a material archetype, the result is a value-based self-esteem. In contrast to the latter, the former provides security in and satisfaction with life. A worth-based self-esteem can also outweigh all of the combined trials and tribulations created by problems related to things of value.

Out of one's solid God-centered self-meaning springs a solid sense of self-worth, a solid multidimensional self-identity structure, and one's top system of values. The latter are those used in making life-shaping decisions; in interpreting one's actions and reactions inside each of one's life-shaping experiences; and in molding one's thoughts about oneself (i.e. self-concepts).

The core of one's self-identity is one's character. Its interior "frame" is one's work products arising from one's character. For example, it was the nature of my character that led me to become a physician. A large dimension of my self-identity has arisen from all the work I put into being the best orthopedic surgeon I could be. The exterior of self-identity is one's personality that is custom designed to fit in with the outside world. It results from the interaction of one's character and the monitored feedback from one's interpreted experiences with other people. Self-identity's fourth dimension extends into an intimate association with somebody or something else.

For example, many people with low self-esteem engage in *"self-selling"* as the price for *"borrowing"* their group's identity. Then they hang on to the shadow of that group's presumed higher self-esteem so as to feel superior to that group's scapegoats. One's self-image is how one assesses what one has in quantities (e.g. body image) and material things. The finishing touches put on one's *"above ground"* self-esteem structure is one's reputation among people that matter. For example, the "baddest dudes" have the most esteemed reputation of anybody on the streets.[4]

The importance they place on their reputation in the ghetto is not particularly affected by people outside the ghetto.

SOME *"MASKS"* AND *"FACES"* OF SELF-ESTEEM

To survive, "decent blacks of the ghetto" must wear many masks. But far too often, a mask becomes converted into a problematic self-esteem *"face."* In other words, destructive *"pretending"* graduates into an unhealthy view of oneself. Anderson[4] characterizes decent ghetto blacks as the *"working poor"* who value hard work, self-reliance, and other mainstream values of the African and Euro-American systems. They stay out of trouble, go to church, and emphasize schooling—all in contrast to their street-oriented ghetto neighbors.

"Decent" youth face constant conflicts with "street" youth and both groups experience problems from the larger society's prejudices and discriminations. These problems significantly contribute to poverty, poor environmental conditions, and under or unemployment—factors alone which fashion lacks, losses, and obstructions to black youths' progress—factors alone which increase daily struggles, troubles, and distress—factors alone which generate emotional disturbances and often hopelessness for a better life.

The assumption made by many white authorities who tested these ghetto youth in the past was that blacks bear a *"disfigured and low self-esteem."*[10] In assessing those same tests and the conditions under which the tests were given, certain other authorities have struck down that assumption because of the lack of a *"level playing field."*[10,11,12] More recent and more objective studies have indicated that *"black's self-evaluations are equal or higher than those of whites and their rate of suicide is about one-half that of whites,"*[13] and that *"black children do not usually hate themselves, idolize whites, and maintain low self-esteem."*[12] If the latter studies are true, then how can it be explained? Could it be that the God-based self-meaning of Afrocentric blacks, the self-esteem nourishing aspects of the black church, and the daily displays of fellowship bonding between "brothers and sisters" of the community are ongoing supports for "high" or "good" self-esteem among the decent ghetto blacks? The Afrocentric expression: *"I am because we are, and we are, therefore, I am,"* seems to layout a pattern principle suggesting a "yes" answer.

Yet, short of an inferiority complex, decent ghetto blacks show several varieties of self-esteem problems. Apart from an unbalanced life-oriented *"all value-based"* or *"all worth-based"* self-esteem, examples include functional low-self-esteem, low self-esteem from erosive cumulative traumas, situational low self-esteem, and low self-esteem from *"big bang"* specific traumas. Instances of the latter may occur in conflicts involving the *"code of the streets"* where *"manhood"* and *"respect"* take center stage. In the ever-present ghetto *"war zone,"* decent youth are constantly on the defensive to maintain respect, while street youth are constantly on the attack to grab what little respect is available. The sudden loss of respect spells immediate and essentially permanent disgrace. The effect of this "big bang"-specific trauma causes an across-the-board shattering of many "props" within the self-esteem complex.

Situational low self-esteem may occur when decent youth are given achievement or similar *"what you learned in school"* tests designed and/or administered by whites.[10] Deliberately creating low scores in order to "belong" is one of the many reasons for scoring low. However, once back home, their normal state of self-esteem often resumes. But much too often the results of these test can have terrible and long-lasting consequences. One is that the low scores can start a chain reaction leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby the person internalizes the false belief of inferiority. In other words, *"if people define situations as real, they are real in their consequences."*[14] Thus, being constantly told that one is a "small person" will cause that per-

son to design his/her life so as to grow to be that small person. Another terrible consequence is the placement of blacks in caged, *"special education"* classes whereby they are removed from a progression toward a chance for success. Les Brown, the internationally famous motivational speaker, was put into one of those classes. When he decided not to allow anyone to define who he was, he flew out of his cage.

Low self-esteem stemming from cumulative traumas in a bad environment is the result of foundational erosions. These effects may be neutralized once the youth leaves the ghetto and gains some measure of success. By remaining in the ghetto, however, erosion may cause permanent damage as, for example, in killing the initiative for achievement. From feeling overwhelmingly controlled and burdened, the resultant low achievers make no attempt to discover, develop, and/or find a niche for their talents. To better understand the effects of self-esteem erosions, let us use the analogy of the 15 to 200 pairs of legs on a centipede. If an arbitrary number of legs, say 30%, are removed, the centipede can still walk, but probably with a lessening of reserve, speed, and endurance. Removing, say 75%, makes for difficulty in walking and even greater losses of reserve, speed, and endurance. By removing a critical number, say 90%, the centipede can no longer walk.

Similarly, if the highest degree of self-esteem is represented by 100 *"legs"* in the self-meaning/identity/concept/image complex, losses of say 30% of self-image and self-concept *"legs"* may not wipe out "good" or "high" self-esteem. However, the person will likely be hypersensitive to slights, quite vulnerable to attacks on self-esteem, and more inclined to assume or resume bad habits. Losing still more legs will eventually create problematic psychological and then psychiatric conditions. How many losses one person can handle will depend upon the number of "legs" one has already developed; the significance one places on the loss of "key legs"; the loss of a certain number of legs; the strength of one's self-meaning and self-identity; one's mental toughness; and one's age.

Children are more likely to experience a "big bang" from relatively minor attacks. Examples include having one of their self-image features laughed at or being called a "bad" self-concept name. Mature persons may simply put such attacks on hold and review what is good about them. In this way, they maintain a homeostatic, healthy self-esteem.

Functional low self-esteem is a reflection of imitating patterns that characterize the low self-esteem. Certain African American slaves found it to their advantage to apply the *"acting dumb and playing crazy"* mask of low self-esteem in their presentations to slave owners. Stepin Fetchit (1902-1985) was known for his film portrayal of stereotyped blacks acting as if they had low self-esteem. He is one of several black movie actors who helped keep alive this model for many black youth to imitate.

Another way of adopting a level of functioning below one's capacities is to imitate bad habits within the ghetto environment. A common example is the misuse of money, as in getting into needless debt. This became quite evident when I was teaching a bimonthly Los Angeles Conservation Corp class to inner city youth several years ago. After a discussion on money management, Willie came to me and said that he had never thought about not being in debt! As a result, he was in a great deal of debt. Then, he incidentally mentioned that this made him feel bad about himself. At the next session, he proudly stated that after applying my suggestions he was able to not only stop getting into more debt, but had managed to reduce his debt by $50. The report several weeks later was that he was debt free. Four years after that, he tracked me down to say how great he was feeling from having saved $20,000. From that he used $9000 to attend forestry school.

Another student told me that when I started giving the sessions he was strongly considering joining a gang. But after hearing my comments,

he decided to pursue pharmacy. Still another student called me nine years later to say that he had read the notes of my lectures almost every week and applied them in his art career. He was proud to announce that he, a black high school dropout, had been invited to Italy to do artwork for pay. From these stories and from other observations, I see the possibilities of great things coming out of the untapped talents in the ghetto. Most difficulties with the self-esteem of ghetto blacks seem reversible if their specific problem(s) can be located in the self-meaning/identity/image/concept complex and then providing them with the pertinent education needed for correction.

In conclusion, the *"social being"* nature of humans dictates that each person construct an internal skyscraper-like structure of self-esteem in order to create, develop, and house one's self-centered life-shaping values. Whereas the childhood structure is tentative, the adult structure is relatively *"fixed."* For both, the source for the creation and development of these values is the four *"underground"* foundational supports of the structure. Those supports are called self-meaning, self-identity, self-image, and self-concepts. The base upon which the supports rest is one's assessments of one's own worth and value contained in each item located inside the foundation.

The *"above ground"* structure, built on top of the foundation, is designed to monitor one's interactions with the outside world. This ongoing regulating and coordination monitoring involves a comparison of one's assessed worth and value items against corresponding items outside oneself. In this way, one eventually fashions a relatively fixed and personally oriented system of values called self-esteem. One's self-esteem is basic to all of those actions and reactions present in one's self-designed experiences. Self-esteem, thus, accounts for the vast majority of the nature and degree of successes and failures one has in life. To put the essence of the afore-going in a short form, self-esteem is the summary judgment of the collected separate assessments of one's self-meaning, self-identity, self-image, and self-concepts.

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